What’s the Alternative to Round-Robin Reading?

In this article in *Middle Ground*, University of Texas/San Antonio professor Janis Harmon and University of North Carolina/Charlotte professor Karen Wood criticize round-robin reading (the teacher calls on students to take turns reading orally without advance preparation) and popcorn reading (students read aloud and each reader gets to choose who goes next). What’s wrong with these time-honored practices? Many students find the format boring; less material is covered because the pace is so slow; many students don’t follow along with the reader; students who are not fluent readers dread being called on, which distracts them from the meaning of the text; reluctant readers suffer from embarrassment when they read poorly; and in popcorn reading, there’s a tendency for each reader to call on his or her friends to read next, which narrows the circle of students who get to read.

Despite these well-documented problems, round-robin reading is common in many classrooms. Why? Because many teachers believe it helps with classroom management (all students are doing the same thing at the same time), boosts comprehension (students see and hear the material), and makes difficult texts accessible to slow readers who can’t or won’t read them silently.

Harmon and Wood believe there are much more effective ways for teachers to use common texts, including:

- **Paired or assisted reading** – Pairs or small groups of students read a passage aloud to each other.

- **Imitative reading** - The teacher reads a passage in an expressive tone and then calls on one or more students to repeat the passage in a similar manner. “Imitating the vocal patterns of an expert reader helps with fluency and pacing which, in turn, helps students understand the author’s message,” say Harmon and Wood.

- **Whisper reading** – Students read passages at a whisper level so they can hear the text they’re reading and make the print-to-speech match. This can be done individually or with a more proficient partner.

- **Choral reading** – All students read aloud together, which can heighten interest and highlight the content.

- **Cloze oral reading** – With students following along, the teacher reads aloud and pauses at strategic moments, asking students to finish the thought or the sentence. This keeps students focused on the text, avoids singling out individual students, and helps students recognize key words.

- **Alternating silent reading** – The teacher periodically asks students to read a passage to themselves and have them retell the meaning and relate it to their own experiences or prior knowledge, either in small groups, in writing, or to the whole class.

- **A medley of the above** – A teacher might begin a lesson by having the whole class chorally read the overview information and then brainstorm and predict. Next, he has students
whisper-read the first two paragraphs in pairs, helping each other with difficult words. Next, he has them engage in paired retelling of the content. During these two segments, the teacher circulates, listening and helping as needed. Next, he tells the class to read the next page silently and has them share the key ideas with their partner. With subsequent passages, he alternates between whisper reading and silent reading, each passage followed by retelling with partners. Harmon and Wood estimate that this approach more than triples the amount of time students are engaged in reading, learning, making speech-to-print matches, and learning and remembering important information.

“Variations on Round Robin Reading” by Janis Harmon and Karen Wood in *Middle Ground*, October 2010 (Vol. 14, #2, p. 38-39), for purchase at [http://www.nmsa.org](http://www.nmsa.org); the authors can be reached at Janis.harmon@utsa.edu and kdwood@uncc.edu.